Self the Unattainable

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The following article, untitled and dated 1960, was originally written as an endpiece to The Essentials of Zen, but was never published. Now, October 1970, the 100 th anniversary of Dr. Suzuki's birth, we are pleased to be able to offer it to our readers. We wish to thank the Matsugaoka Library for permission to include it here. Ed.

SINCE Zen began to be more or less popularized among a certain group of young Americans whose immature minds, I am afraid, are liable to go off the track immoderately, Zen has been grossly misrepresented. Even among sober-minded professional people this danger seems to be growing. It is true that Zen holds in it something tending to invite a certain kind of misinterpretation; this is inevitably attached to every new approach to reality.

There is another kind of danger coming from quite a different source which is not on the side of the Western writers or students. Zen is not an easy subject to write about, and it is not meant for anybody to do so. First of all, a certain personal experience is needed, to attain which requires a number of years. Secondly, experience alone is not enough. One must be acquainted with the whole range of Zen literature. In spite of their claim that Zen is beyond expressions or explanations, the masters in China where it originated and in Japan where it is still flourishing have written voluminously on the subject. There are a large number of books known as "Sayings" (*goroku* in Japanese and *yü-lu* in Chinese), which have been left by them. The masters, it is true, had no intention to leave any such things for posterity. It was their disciples who collected them and compiled them into "Sayings," which consist generally of their sermons and *mondō* ("questions and answers") they had with their pupils. Historically and doctrinally, they are very informing and abound in deep reflections. Those who desire to elucidate Zen literally as far as this treatment is possible must study all these sermons and *mondō*, at least the most important ones. Those compiled during the T'ang and the Sung are particularly thought-provoking, for Zen enjoyed its heyday in these two historical periods. After

this they showed signs of decline, and the literature then produced lacks the vigor and originality of previous times

Toward the end of this paper I have appended a list of books in Chinese which will help scholars who have access to the original sources to pursue their studies of Zen.

The essential discipline of Zen consists in emptying the self of all its psychological contents, in stripping the self of all its trappings moral, philosophical, and spiritual, which it has put on itself ever since the first awakening of consciousness. When the self thus stands in its native nakedness, it beggars all description. The only device we can use to make it more approachable and communicable is to resort to a figure of speech. The self in its is-ness pure and simple is comparable to a circle with no circumference, and, therefore, with its center nowhere which is everywhere. It is again a zero which is equal to or rather identical with infinity. Infinity here is not to be conceived in a serial fashion as an infinite series of natural numbers; it is a group with its contents of infinite multitudinousness which is taken in its totality. I formulate it in this way: $O \equiv \infty$, $\infty \equiv O$. It goes without saying that the identification transcends mathematical speculation. A kind of metaphysical formula is now obtained: Self≡ Zero, and Zero≡Infinity, and Self≡Infinity.

The self, therefore, emptied of all its so-called psychological contents is not an emptiness as is generally supposed. No such empty self exists. The emptied self is no other than the psychological self cleansed of its ego-centric imagination. It is just as rich in its contents as before; indeed it is richer than before because it now contains the whole world in itself instead of having the latter stand against it. Not only that, it enjoys itself being true to itself. It is free in the real sense of the word because it is the master of itself, absolutely independent, self-relying, authentic, and autonomous. This Self—I capitalize—is the Buddha who declared at his birth: "I alone am the most honored one in heaven and on earth."

This way of understanding the self or Self requires a great deal of explanation. When Zen is left to itself it explains itself and no words are needed. But I have already committed myself to talking about it and I have to do my best, however brief, to make the above description more comprehensible for the reader.

We all know that the self we ordinarily talk about is psychological or rather logical and dualistic; it is set against a not-self, it is a subject opposing an object

or objects. It is full of contents, and is very complicated. Therefore, when the complex is dissected and its component factors are set aside as not belonging to it, it is reduced, we think, to a nothing or an emptiness. And it is for this reason that Buddhism upholds the doctrine of *anātman*, egolessness, which means that there is no psychological substratum corresponding to the word "self" (*ātman*) as when we say a table we have something substantial answering to the sound "table." "Ego" is an empty phonetic symbol which is useful in our daily intercourse as social beings.

We also refer to an ego or a self using the pronoun "I" when we are introspective and bifurcate ourselves into subject and object. But this self-introspective bifurcating process in our attempt to orient the self is endless and we can never come to a terminating abode where "the self" is comfortably resting. "The self" is after all non-existent, we may conclude. But at the same time we can never get rid of a self—we somehow always stumble over it—which is very annoying as it interferes with our sense of freedom. The annoyance we feel, consciously or unconsciously, is in fact the cause of our mental uneasiness. How does or can this non-existent "self"—that which can never be taken hold of on our rationalistic dualistic plane of existence—interfere in various ways with our innate feeling of freedom and authenticity? Can this ego be really such a ghostly existence, an empty nothing, a zero like a shadow of the moon in the water? If it is really such a non-existent existence, how does it ever get into our consciousness or imagination? Even an airy nothing has something substantial at the back of it. A memory always has some real base, maybe in the unknown, altogether forgotten past even beyond our individual experience.

The Self then is not a nothing or an emptiness and something incapable of producing work. It is much alive in our innate feeling of freedom and authenticity. When it is stripped of all its trappings, moral and psychological, and when we imagine it to be a void, it is not really so, not negativistic, but there must be something absolute in it. It must not be a mere zero symbolizing the negation of all dualistically conceived objects, but an absolute existence which exists in its own right. Relatively or dualistically, it is true, the self is "the unattainable" (*anupalabdha*), but this "unattainable" is not to be understood at the level of our ordinary dichotomous thinking.

The Unattainable, so termed, subsists in its absolute right which we must now take hold of in the way hitherto unsuspected in our intellectual pursuit of

reality. The intellect is to be let aside for a while in spite of "a certain sense of intellectual discomfort" one may have, and we must plunge into the nothingness which is beyond the intellect, threateningly opening its maw in the form of an abysmal pit. The Unattainable is attained as such in its just-so-ness, and the strange thing is that when this takes place the intellectual doubts which have interfered with our bodily functions are dissolved and one feels free, independent, and self-masterly. The experiences at the level of intellection are restrictive and conditioning, but the "inner" Self feels the way God felt when he uttered "Let there be light." This is where zero identifies itself with infinity and infinity with zero. And let us remember that both zero and infinity are not negative concepts, but utterly positive.

By being positive I mean that infinity as I said before is not to be conceived serially as something taking place in time where things succeed or precede one another endlessly in all directions. It is the idea of wholeness which can never be totalized or summed up as a whole. It is a circle whose circumference knows no boundaries. It is what makes us sense or feel that the world in which we live is limited and finite and yet which does not allow us to be taken as limited and finite. From our ordinary point of view such a concept is inadmissible, impossible, irrational, and yet there is something in it which compels us to accept it. And when we accept it, all impossibilities and irrationalities vanish, regardless of all the intellectual discomfort one may feel. In fact, this kind of discomfort rises out of our not totally and unconditionally accepting the ultimate "irrationality."

This inability on our part to accept is what Zen tries to do away with. To understand Zen, therefore, means to be "comfortable" in every possible way. This state of mind is known as "pacification of Mind" or "making Mind restful and comfortable" (*anjin* or *an-bsin*). It takes place when the impossible, or the Unattainable in Zen terminology, is experienced as such. The word "experience" is used here in its most specific sense. It is a sort of inner sense which comes out on the individualized plane of sense-experience, as a totalistic response of one's being. It is an *im-mediate* and altogether personal response, which makes the total experience appear like a sense-perception; but in actuality the total one takes place along with the sense. The sense-experience is partitive and stops at the periphery of consciousness, whereas the total one springs from the being itself and makes one feel or perceive that the experience is that of the

Unattainable itself. When the sense is thus backed by the total being, "Zen irrationalities or absurdities" become intelligible.

The one trouble we have with language whereby we are frequently misled to commit a gross error, especially when we encounter metaphysical questions, is that our language does not exactly and truthfully represent what it is supposed to represent. Language is a product of intellection and intellection is what our intellect adds to, or, it may be better to say, subtracts from, reality. Reality is not in language as it is in itself. To understand reality one must grasp it in one's own hands, or, better, be it. Otherwise, as Buddhists aptly illustrate, we shall be taking the finger for the moon; the finger is the pointer and not the moon itself. In the same way, money is a convenient medium which we exchange for real substance. When a crisis comes we let the money go and hold on to bread. Language is money and the finger. We must keep our brains from being muddled.

The reason why Zen distrusts language is now plain enough. Those who think Zen is idiotic are still under the spell of linguistic magic. Daitō the National Teacher (1282–1337) of Japan has the following poem:

When one sees with ears
And hears with eyes,
No doubts one cherishes:
How naturally the raindrops
Fall from the eaves!

It is not really the ears or eyes that hear or see. Were it so, then, as the Buddha asks, why do not the dead see and hear just as much as the living? What hears and sees is not the sense-organ but Self the Unattainable. The sense-organs are instruments the Self uses for Itself. And when It hears, Its hearing reaches the end of the universe which has no ears corresponding to ours. So with the rest of the senses. It is not the particular sense alone that hears or sees. When It hears I hear, you hear, everybody, every being hears. It is for this reason when I attain enlightenment the whole universe attains it. The Unattainable is attained as unattainable—this is the experience not of the psychological or logical self, but of the Unattainable Self.

A monk in China asked an ancient master, "What made Bodhidharma come from the West to our country?" The question surprised the master who counter-

asked the monk, "Why do you question about Bodhidharma instead of yourself?"

This may require a little explanation for those who have never studied Zen. Bodhidharma of India is supposed to have brought Zen to China early in the sixth century though the historical fact is that Zen as we have it today actually started in China early in the T'ang with a native master known as Enō (638–713 A.D.). The traditional story of Zen's Indian origin, however, raised the question about Bodhidharma's motive in trying to propagate Zen in China. But the real meaning of this question is concerned with the source of human will or with the awakening of human consciousness: What makes us will this or that? What is the meaning of life? Therefore, the monk's question about Bodhidharma as above-cited is really an affair of the monk's own being. The master pointed this out when he challenged the monk by saying, "Why not about yourself?" The challenge is meant to make the monk think about himself, about his own being, his own destiny. Hence the monk's inquiry that followed, "What then is my Self?" The master told him, "There is something deeply hidden within yourself and you must be acquainted with its hidden activity." When the monk begged to be told about this hidden activity, the master opened his eyes and closed them. No words came from him.

Butsugen* (1067–1120), who quoted the above story in one of his sermons, adds:

> On other places they give a *kōan* to solve, but here with me the present is the problem. [The "present" is to be understood in the modern sense of "here-now"]. Do you not remember? It was Ummon (died 949) who said that your Self is mountains and rivers and the great earth. This was his answer when a monk asked Ummon about the monk's Self. This is pretty good. My question is: Are these—mountains and rivers and the great earth—really existent or non-existent. If they keep up their existence, wherein do we see the Self? If we say they are non-existent, they are actually existent and how do we deny them? Here is where we need an awakening (*satori*). Otherwise, the teaching of the ancient masters means nothing . . .

What Butsugen tries to say here quoting the ancient master is an objective

Sayings of the Elder Masters (Kosonbuku Goroku 古尊宿語錄), Fas. 31.

presentation of the Self. The Self, far from being empty notion of the nothingness, is here right before us in full revelation. The great earth with its mountains and rivers, plants and animals, rains and winds—are they not all revealing themselves in front of us, for us to see, and to hear, what they are? They are just waiting to make us become conscious of "the sense of non-discrimination" (*avikalpitajñā*), which is dormant within us just this moment. This *jnaña* is to be differentiated from intellection: intellection helps us in discriminating, dichotomizing, dissecting, and finally in killing objects which it attempts to understand. The *jnaña* is inborn, indefinable, unattainable, but ultimately leads us to the Self in its just-so-ness. Until this time comes upon us, we are not to talk about freedom, independence, authenticity, and self-determination. They do not belong in the realm of intellectual relativity.

Avikalpitajñā is also called "*jnaña* not learned from a teacher," that is, a kind of inborn sense not acquired by means of learning or experience. It has nothing to do with accumulated knowledge. It comes out of one's inmost being all at once when the zero-self becomes identified with totalistic infinity. Hō-kōji once asked his master Baso (d. 780), "What kind of person is he who has no companion among the ten thousand things (*dharma*)?" Baso replied, "I will tell you when you have swallowed up the Western River at one gulp." This is a most illuminating answer on the Self. For the Self emptied of all its relative contents and standing in its nakedness knows no companion like the Buddha "who alone is the most honored one" in the whole universe; he at this very moment drinks up not only the Western River but all the rivers in the world, no, all the oceans surrounding Mount Sumeru at one gulp. Here then the formula takes place: $O \equiv \infty$.

This *jñā* or *jñāna* or *prajñā* cannot be included under any category, it is not knowledge, nor is it wisdom, nor mere cleverness, nor intelligence of any order. But we find it deeply buried in our inmost being. To awaken it and to become conscious of its presence within ourselves requires a great deal of self-discipline, moral, intellectual, and spiritual. Zen is decidedly not latitudinarian, not antinomian. The masters are always very emphatic upon this point of self-discipline, and one of them goes as far as to say that "if you cannot get it (*satori*) in twenty or thirty years of hard study you may cut my head off." This is ascribed to Jōshū (778–897).

What Zen most emphasizes in its disciplinary practice is to attain a spiritual

freedom and not revolting against conventionalism. The freedom may consist sometimes in eating when hungry and resting when tired, but sometimes, probably frequently, in not eating when hungry and not resting when tired. In other words, Zen may find its great followers more among conformists than among rebellious and boisterous non-conformists.

The following books in Chinese are essential in the study of Zen, inclusive of its history, teaching, and practice:

1. 楞伽師資記 *Ryōga Shiji Ki (Lêng-ch'ieh Shih-tzŭ Chi)*
   "Records of the Masters and Disciples of the *Lankavatara Sutra.*" By Jōkaku (Ching-chüeh), probably of early 8th century. One of the Zen texts discovered at Tun-huang. 1 fascicle
2. 歴代法宝記 *Rekidai Hōbō Ki (Li-tai Fa pao chi)*
   "A History of the Dharma-Treasure."
3. 六祖法宝壇経 *Rokuso Hōbō Dangyō (Liu-tsu Fa-Pao T'an-ching)*
   "The Sixth Patriarch on the Dharma-Treasure." By Enō (Hui-nêng). 1 fascicle.
4. 神会録 *Jinne Roku (Shên-hui Lu)*
   "Sayings of Shên-hui." One of the Zen texts discovered at Tun -huang. 1 fascicle.
5. 圓覚経大疏 *Engaku Kyō Taiso (Yüan-chüeh Ching Ta-su)*
   "A Commentary on the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment.*" By Tsung-mi (780–841). 12 fascicles.
6. 古尊宿語録 *Kosonshuku Goroku (Ku-tsun-su Yü-lu)*
   "Sayings of the Elder Masters." By Seki Zōsu (Tse the Librarian) and Shimyō (Shih Ming) of the Sung. 54 fascicles.
7. 大慧宗杲語録 (普説) *Dai-e Sōkō Goroku (Ta-hui Tsung-kao yü-lu)*
   "Sayings of Dai-e" (1089–1163). 50 fascicles.
8. 景徳傳燈録 *Keitoku Dentō Roku (Ching-tê Ch'uan-têng Lu)*
   "Transmission of the Lamp." Ascribed to Dōgen (Tao-yüan). Compiled during the Ching-tê Era (1004–8) of the Sung. 30 fascicles.
9. 続傳燈録 *Zoku Dentō Roku (Hsü Ch'uan-têng Lu)*
   "The Supplementary Work" to the above. Records kept down to the end of the Sung, 1280. Author unknown, but some consider him to be Enki Kochō (Yüan-chi Chü-ting). 36 fascicles.